



**29 May 1453**

# **The Fall of Constantinople**

**The Ottoman Challenge to Europe**

*'The spider weaves the curtains in the palace of the Caesars'*

A victorious Sultan Mehmed II enters Constantinople's Hagia Sophia and meditates

The city of Constantinople itself was all that remained of the Byzantine empire by 1453. It was defended by less than 7,000 men as opposed to the Ottoman Turkish army of 80,000 which was camped outside the city walls under the command of the twenty-year-old Sultan Mehmet II (r. 1451-81). The entire province of Thrace to the west of the city had already been ravaged and a Turkish naval fleet assembled at Gallipoli. Constantinople's ditches had been deepened and the city moat flooded. The final siege of the city began on 2 April 1453. The city gates were closed and a great iron chain was stretched across the entrance to the defensive inlet of the Golden Horn to the north-west. The sultan, however, ordered his fleet of galleys to be dragged overland and into the Golden Horn which, at a stroke, was no longer a Greek harbour.

The Turkish assault started at about half-past one in the morning of Tuesday 29 May. Irregular forces were followed by Anatolians who were succeeded by waves of janissaries – the sultan's own guard – urged on by martial music as they advanced in regular ranks. The sultan led them as far as the fosse and then urged them on up to the stockade. Just before dawn Giovanni Giustiniani Longo, who had been in charge of the defence of the city walls, was injured and a small gate of the inner wall had to be opened so he could be taken off the field of battle. His Genoese contingent of 700 men also retreated through the gate before it could be closed. Retreating Greeks had also left open another gate in the walls and the Turks rushed in. The emperor Constantine XI was last seen advancing on foot towards the fray. Constantinople was sacked in scenes of terrible and indiscriminate slaughter. St Sophia became a mosque. On 21 June the victorious sultan left for his European court of Adrianople. 'What a city we have given over to plunder and devastation,' he murmured as he rode through a desolate scene. For the Greeks, Tuesday is still an unlucky day.

The force which had crushed the last political expression of Greek Christian culture and thereby also extinguished the last flickering flame of the ancient Roman empire was the most effective military machine ever produced in the history of Islam. These Ottoman Turks were descended from the inhabitants of 'Tartary', the Turko-Mongolian steppe land of Inner Asia. Their Turkish language was just one of a large group of languages collectively known as the Turkic group (to which Tatar, Uzbek and Kazakh also belong) which were found in Mongolia and Siberia. The Ottoman arrival at the gates of Constantinople was the last stage in that progressive series of westward movements of the Turkic peoples which had started with the impact upon them of the Huns during the first and second centuries AD. China and its allies on the steppe then pushed the Turks westwards to a point at which there were Turks on the Volga and Black Sea steppes in the fifth century. The early mediaeval period saw the emergence of two Turkish imperial powers, those of the eastern and the western steppe, ruled over by their *qaghans*. These were holy figures whose blood could not be shed. Instead they were deposed and strangled – a custom which would survive into early Ottoman practice. Right from the beginning, with its mixture of Turkic, Mongolic and Iranian peoples, of nomads and semi-nomads, the Turkic state in its various forms was multi-lingual and multi-ethnic. The Seljuks, emerging from the collapse of earlier Turkic states and empires, were the first Turks to make a serious impact on the fringes of the European world. Trading and raiding contacts with the Arabs had by now introduced Turkic nomads to Islam. The monotheism of that

faith could build on the tradition of worshipping a single sky god which had been an ancient custom among the peoples of the Asiatic steppe.

The rise of the Turks who were loyal to the ruling house of Seljuk is an eleventh century phenomenon and they were the first major Islamic power among the Turkish peoples. Having consolidated their position in Iran and Transcaucasia, they established their power in the old Arab-Islamic heartlands and towards the eastern Mediterranean. Serious and regular confrontation with the clearly ailing Byzantine state to the west now began. The clash between the two empires in 1071 at the battle of Manzikert was the single greatest catastrophe so far in Byzantine history. At a stroke all of Anatolia was lost and a series of principalities (*begliks*) were established in this area by the Seljuk army and tribal commanders. The collapse of the greater empire of the Seljuks (which had included Iran and Iraq as well as Afghanistan and Syria) led to Anatolia becoming a distinct entity separate from the main line and governed by the Seljuks of Rum. These rulers had intermarried with the neighbouring Georgian and Byzantine aristocracy and were full heirs to the tradition mixing culture and religions. Greeks served at the Seljuk court and there were émigré Turks who served the emperor in Constantinople. By the early thirteenth century the Seljuks of Rum were governing a powerful and well-defined state based in Anatolia and comprising much of modern Turkey.

The Mongol invasions in the first half of the thirteenth century destabilized Seljuk power and also pushed the Turkic-Islamic world further west so that it was increasingly in touch with the Byzantine and Christian world. By the late thirteenth century most of Anatolia was Islamic and the most important of the area's principalities was the one ruled by the house of Osman (the state which then grew into the Ottoman empire). Its greatest threat came from Tamburlaine who, although a Turk, aimed at the restoration of Mongol power. His army marched westward from central Asia during the fourteenth century and by the time he died (c.1405) he had brought much of central Eurasia and large parts of the middle east under his rule. He sacked Delhi in 1398 and died while marching towards China. Only his death saved Anatolian Turkey from his sustained attention and, happily for the Ottomans, Timur's son Shahrukh was less driven than his father by a policy of conquest.

The early Ottoman state was an informal organization shaped by the demands of the frontier. Religious divisions within it were not as sharp as they later became and its subjects were essentially plunderers more interested in trade and booty than in pursuing an Islamic campaign. An 'Ottoman' was simply someone who had decided to join the group. Many Byzantine and Balkan Christian warriors therefore became Ottomans purely for commercial reasons although the Christians who joined were soon Islamicized. As the Mongol threat declined during the fourteenth century so the Ottoman state grew in power and so started the long history of confrontation between the Greeks of Byzantium and the Ottoman Turks. In 1261 the Byzantines retook Constantinople after having been driven out of the city by the western European 'Latin' crusaders during the Fourth Crusade in 1204. But the Greeks made a crucial mistake. Their ambition to become once again a major power in the eastern Mediterranean led them to neglect their eastern land defences. A power as relentless as that of the Ottomans found it easy to exploit the internal Greek divisions and they

were able to establish themselves in Gallipoli in the 1350s because they had been invited in by one of the warring parties in Constantinople.

From their bases in the Balkans the Ottomans went on to mount their first attempt at capturing Vienna in 1529. During the reign of Selim I (1512-20) they conquered the Mamluks – rulers of Egypt and Syria – whom they also succeeded as guardians of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The Ottoman Turks were now incontestable leaders of the Sunni Muslim world, a world power and absolutist state which combined two types of legitimacy: the Turkic with the Islamic. This new status reached its apotheosis in the reign of Suleyman I 'the Magnificent' (1520-66). Suleyman was a counterpart to the Renaissance princes whose bravura signified a new chapter in the history of kingship in western Europe. He was a major military strategist who conducted some thirteen land campaigns, a political reformer who abolished some of his predecessors' arbitrary methods of government, and also an accomplished poet. Yet he also threatened the very basis of Christian Europe. His armies took Belgrade in 1521 and then Rhodes in 1522. His victory at the battle of Mohács in 1526 led to the incorporation of most of Hungary within the Ottoman empire. For a century afterwards the Hapsburgs had a fight on their hands to regain Hungary although the Ottoman failure to take Vienna in 1529 was a major boost for the west. Meanwhile, Suleyman continued to advance against Iran and in 1534 he took Iraq from the Safavids.

The fall of Constantinople was the culmination of the division of fortunes between the Latin Christendom of western Europe and the Greek Orthodox Christendom of the east. Granada fell in 1492 and the last Moors were expelled from Spain. Islam, defeated in the west, concentrated its onslaught on the east. Islamic-Christian confrontation was now on an east-west axis, not a north-south one. A triumphalist western Europe turned towards the Atlantic for new trade routes to replace the traditional eastern ones which crossed the territories dominated by the victorious Ottomans.

By the mid-sixteenth century it was obvious, in retrospect, that the Ottomans were suffering from a classic case of imperial over-stretch and that they could not afford to maintain their borders. In 1552 the Portuguese defeated an Ottoman fleet at Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. During the 1550s the Muscovite army started to press in on the Ottomans from the north and this constitutes the start of the great Russian-Ottoman rivalry which would continue until the collapse of both empires during World War I. The dynamism of Peter the Great (1672-1725) would transform the old Muscovy into Russia and sustain its claim to be the heir to the traditions both of Genghis Khan and of Byzantium. And the Hapsburgs, although caught up in the European trauma of Protestant-Catholic conflict until 1555, nonetheless proved to be a very effective anti-Ottoman bulwark. The problem of dynastic succession was now undermining Ottoman government. Conflict and jealousy had always been endemic within the imperial harem and the weakness of Suleyman's successors aggravated the situation. The custom of imperial fratricide died away but fundamental reforms would elude the waning empire of the Ottomans. In the arts of politics and of war, in administrative practices and social customs, the very word Ottoman was becoming synonymous with inefficiency, ignorance and backwardness.